

Haaretz, 29.02.2016:

A question about a concert experience:

How much is the level of performance important, in comparison with the material played or sung?

Prima facie, the answer is banal – everything is important.

The truth: the relative emphasis changes, especially according to the content. The important works of George Friedrich Handel are an example. For example, whoever knows the oratory "Messiah", having heard it many times (one of the most widely performed works), will find it difficult to just enjoy it in an ok performance. On the other hand, at the opera "Julius Cesare in Egitto" by Handel, it is different; since it is an opera and not an oratory, and since its full performance requires a very big financial investment, its public performances are quite rare (in Israel it was performed last time 10 years ago, at the Israeli Opera, conducted by David Stern).

Having said this, the idea to perform a long chain of arias from "Julius Cesare" seems obvious and the Estonian conductor Andres Mustonen realized it. The performers list included two Israeli singers: soprano Claire Meghnagi and countertenor Yaniv D'Or, Estonian soloists (3 female singers and one tenor), and the orchestra of the Estonian National Opera. Also a choir from Estonia participated but their role in this event was not crucial. The result: Handel, with the chain of amazing inventions he created in Julius Cesare, came down to the hall like a great flood. A chain of lights and thunders of technical displays, combined with jaw dropping melodic inventions and decorated with beautiful orchestrations. Since most of the arias are not as famous as the one by Mozart, Rossini or Verdi, the effect was strong; since the music gave the tone, the level of performance (which was satisfactory) was not critical. The expected came true: the Israeli singers sounded more "Baroque" in style than their Estonian counterparts. As to the guest singers – they all have very good voices, well equipped for performances in large halls (casting such singers for baroque operas are part of Andres Mustonen's agenda). As to Mustonen's way of leading the chain: the storming arias were led with impetus. The message was one: passion, power. With this kind of approach one would suspect a fall of tension since the audience had no time to recover between the peaks, but such a tension fall never occurred, as long as I'm concerned anyway.

This concert was part of MustonenFest events that take place in Israel with the support of the Estonian Ministry of Culture, Tallinn Municipality and other supporters.

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It is important to mention that the most important Handel event of the festival is still ahead – and it is a fully staged performance of the opera Rinaldo, along with the Estonian National Opera (orchestra and singers) and with a British stage director, today at the opera house. This great opera was never performed in Israel before and it is therefore a very curious event.

Haaretz, 1.03.2016 : Rinaldo

How to direct a story about romance and heroic actions and also unnatural events that take place during the first crusade, while its heroes are the commander Rinaldo, his lover Almirena, King Argante (Muslim leader of Jerusalem) and a Muslim witch from Damascus named Armida? What do you do when the text itself, without the Handel clothing, is a chain of silly phraseology, at least when seeing it from the point of view of our days?

The solution set by director William Relton (the version brought up so far only in Tallinn) can be summarized in 3 words: smart, crisp and non serious. Seeing the staging and directing, one could feel that this is the only way to deal with this beautiful Handel opera, which, similar to Julius Cesare, is also a long chain of most beautiful arias. More than that – Relton's way, which may not be an innovative approach, yet excellent in its outcome, creates the feeling that also the young George Friedrich Handel, in his time, treated this text with inspired levity. The connection between Handel's inventions and Relton's jokes (in good taste always), were naturally coupled.

Musically,...More than all, caught my ear soprano Helen Lepalaan in the role of "Armida". Mezzo-soprano Monika-Evelyn Liiv, in the role of Rinaldo, did her job fine and so did soprano Helen Lokuta as Almirena. Estonian National Opera Orchestra sounded strong and not always subtle, but the solo parts of the musicians were excellent.

In Summary: "Rinaldo" by Handel set quite flashy ending to the Estonian festival. By the way: This festival will return next February, once again directed by Andres Mustonen. Among other things, participants and plans will include: chorus and soloists from Estonia, Israeli soloists, that will join the Jerusalem Symphony for the performance of Mozart's Great Mass and will appear also with the " Barrocade Ensemble " Israel; Two jazz singers; and Finnish pianist Olly Mustonen (who is not a direct relative of Andres Mustonen).

Amir Kidron, music blog music4awhile

An arguably incomplete yet great enjoyment at a concert performance of excerpts from Handel's Giulio Cesare at the Tallin-TLV festival.

Conductor Andres Mustonen produced an uplifting, energetic sound from the Estonian Opera orchestra, yet kept it balanced so as not to shadow the singers - at least those of them who cope well with orchestral mass.

Mustonen's conducting is wild and theatrical, but in opposition to colleagues not to be mentioned by name, it seems his extrovert show does not aim to conceal any musical incompetence. On the contrary - Maestro Mustonen is a pro and forwards his obvious delight to his musicians and to the audience.

Mustonen also showed his skills as a violinist when captivatingly and freely accompanied "Se in fiorito" - one of the concert's many highlights.

Another complement goes to the hypnotizing oboe playing during "V'adoro".

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Monika E. Liiv was an impressive Cesare with a heavy yet agile enough voice. One admits that more a refined singing is required, and also creativity in the da capo sections, but in any case this is a marvelous voice that deserves a full production of the opera, hopefully alongside Claire Meghnagi's wonderful Cleopatra, who most of all dazzled in "Non disperar" with her humor, charisma, sex appeal and outstanding musicality & vocal production.

To sum it up, all in all this was an enjoyable event which mostly proved the possibility, demand for and magic of Baroque operas staging in Israel. A decade has passed since Israeli Opera produced Cesare. Are we to count on the coming management changes, or wait only for Mustonen to take the challenge?

«Ринальдо» — впервые в Израиле и хорошо бы каждый год!

<http://www.israelculture.info/rinaldo-vpervye-v-izraile-i-xoroshoby-kazhdyj-god/>

By [Masha Hinich](#)

Posted on 06.03.2016

Как из барочной оперы (музыки монотонной, не современной, местами тяжеловесной и давно написанной) сделать очаровательную легкую игру, полную юмора, безделок, доброты, атмосферы квеста, приключений, любви и правильному ко всему отношению. Как — не знаю, но у Андреса Мустонена, Эстонской Национальной оперы, ее солистов (Моника-Эвелин Лийв, Оливера Куузика, Рауно Эльп, Хелен Лепалаан, Хелен Локута) хора и оркестра, а также английского режиссера Уильяма Релтона это получилось восхитительно! И всего одно представление — и оно уже, увы, закончилось. Давали «Ринальдо» Георга Фридриха Генделя — первый раз в Израиле, но, надеюсь, не последний. «Мустонен-Фест», проводившийся в Израиле уже в третий раз, включал среди прочих 26 концертов, и две барочных оперы Генделя — «Юлий Цезарь в Египте» и «Ринальдо». Надо обладать исключительно положительной энергией и исключительно целостным видением, чтобы, не меняя ни одной ноты, сделать из этих произведений настолько яркие, настолько веселые (пусть и на серьезные темы) спектакли. Bravo устроителям! И ждем таких постановок снова и снова.

Rinaldo

<http://playstosee.com/rinaldo/>

[Shmuel Ben-Tovim](#)

6th March 2016

Opera

By Georg Friedrich Händel

Director: William Relton (UK)

Conductor: Andres Mustonen

Estonian National Opera

Cast includes: Monika-Evelyn Liiv, Helen Lokuta, Helen Lepalaan, Oliver Kuusik, Rauno Elp Estonian National Opera Orchestra and Boy's Choir

[The Israeli Opera, Tel-Aviv](#)

Next performances: Tallinn, April 10 and 22

Reviewed by Shmuel Ben-tovim

29 February 2016

Rinaldo is loosely based on Torquato Tasso's epic poem "Jerusalem Delivered". As this was the first production of the opera in Israel in recent memory, one may claim that Rinaldo came back home to the Holy Land 305 years too late.

To the full credit of Handel and the production, it did not sound neither looked like a three centuries old opera. It could well be another successful musical, as much as a new production of West Side Story that was coincidentally premiered in the neighbouring Cameri Theatre on the same night.

Handel's music is nothing short of brilliant: beautiful catchy melodies, gorgeous arias, fully explaining the immediate success of Rinaldo in London, in the days in which his listeners could not have familiarize themselves with the music beforehand through radio or recordings. The famous moving aria "Lascia ch'io pianga", sung by Almirena in Act 2, is still a masterpiece, but not the only one.

Speaking about the music, one can hardly find a better interpreter than Andres Mustonen. His orchestra was swiped by his enthusiasm and his solo pieces with the violin were authentic and clear as crystal. By the way, the production of Rinaldo in Tel-Aviv was part of the annual "MustonenFest" Tallin – Tel-Aviv Music Festival.

The role of Rinaldo was sung, not exceptionally, by a female, the mezzo Monika-Evelyn Liiv, who was very loud and clear, but did not excel as an actress. The two sopranos have much more demanding roles, and both Helens were fantastic, better than anyone can expect: Helen Lokuta as Almirena and Helen Lepalaan as Armida. No doubt they stole the show.

Their key performances in Act II made it the better one, with much more support from the audience, who was somewhat sleepy during Act I.

This beautiful production also owes its success to the excellent work of Stage Director William Relton who gave it a modern look, full with smart gimmicks and visual attractions.

<http://pamelahickmansblog.blogspot.com/2016/03/andres-mustonen-directs-concert.html>

Andres Mustonen directs a concert performance of Handel's "Giulio Cesare" at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art



Soprano Claire Meghnagi (photo:Maxim Reider)

Under the musical direction of Estonian violinist and conductor Andres Mustonen, the 3rd Tallinn-Tel Aviv MustonenFest took place from February 18th to March 2nd 2016. Baroque operas were among the special events in this year's festival, with a fully-staged performance of Händel's "Rinaldo" by the Estonian National Opera Company and a concert performance of the composer's "Giulio Cesare in Egitto" (Julius Caesar in Egypt). This writer attended the latter event on February 27th in the Recanati Hall of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The performance was conducted by Andres Mustonen. Joining him were the Estonian National Opera Orchestra and the Voces Musicales Choir (Estonia), with soloists from both Estonia and Israel. The Estonian soloists were soprano Helen Lokuta, mezzo-sopranos Monika-Evelin Liiv and Juuli Lill and tenor Oliver Kuusik; the Israeli soloists were soprano Claire Meghnagi and countertenor Yaniv D'Or.

With eight principal characters and one of the largest orchestras for which Händel had written, not to mention the work's unflagging high quality and enduring popularity, "Giulio Cesare" (1724), to a libretto by Nicola Haym, was surely a fine choice for a festive concert version. Another advantage at the concert was hearing different singers' interpretation of the same character: we heard Cesare's arias (scored by Händel for an alto castrato) sung by both Liiv and D'Or, Sesto (originally written for soprano en travesti) sung by Kuusik and Lokuta; Cleopatra was portrayed by both Meghnagi and Lokuta.

The concert opened with the Overture to "Cesare in Egitto", with Mustonen's typically vigorous conducting setting the tone for the evening's performance, this followed by the Voces Musicales singers' powerful and forthright singing of "Viva il nostre Alcide". There was a strong sense of the deep enquiry and experience Monika-Evelin Liiv (Estonian National Opera) has in her tasteful and unmannered performance of this work, her voice even and rich in all registers, her lower range strong and abounding in presence. In "Se in fiorito ameno prato" Liiv and Mustonen (violin) duet, converse and intertwine musical strands, her expressive melismas answered by the many personal utterances of his violin. As Cesare, Yaniv D'Or's dramatic reading of arias of Cesare and Tolomeo went hand-in-glove with Händel's electrifying characterizations, the composer's own star-studded cast and Mustonen's candid approach. Dealing with challenging musical texts and fast tempi, he communicated with the audience, giving expression to fiery moments of animosity, as in "Si spietata", in which the spurned Tolomeo threatens and insults Cornelia.

In the role of Sesto, tenor Oliver Kuusik, of the Estonian National Opera, shared his wonderfully rich and powerful timbre, his dramatic flair and audience appeal in "Svegliatevi nel core", the aria in which Sesto vows to take revenge on those who killed his father, Pompey, the artist later superbly shaping the agenda of revenge on Tolomeo in "L'angue offeso mai riposa", likening it to a striking serpent. As the manipulative Cleopatra, the pivotal character of the opera, Claire Meghnagi was vivacious and sensuous, performing each gesture, her voice gliding effortlessly into its upper register in "Non desperar" as she sang of her decision to use her beauty to seduce Caesar. In the darker "Piangerò la sorte mia" she crafted the melody line with pensive, exquisite elegance, lavishing feisty intensity on the middle section before returning the heartbreak of the first section with silky smoothness and fine ornamenting. Singing Cleopatra's love song "V'adoro pupille" and

partnered with the serene oboe obbligato, Helen Lokuta, of the Estonian National Opera, created a sense of calm and directness with singing that was natural, polished and richly flowing. Cleopatra's joy at suddenly being freed by Cesare from impending imprisonment took flight in "Da tempeste il legno infranto", with Lokuta's virtuosic vocal agility and lively - sometimes mischievous - facial expressions energetic and energizing. The well-matched timbres of Lokuta (Sesto) and Juuli Lill of the Estonian National Opera (Cornelia) created the empathy of "Son nato a sospirar". In "Non ha più che temere ques'alma", Lill depicts Cornelia's sorrow and self-pity at the loss of her husband and the near death of her son but hope as well, in her superbly woven fusion of music and text.



Juuli Lill, Helen Lokuta, Andres Mustonen (photo: Maxim Reider)

Supported by fine, richly-coloured playing on the part of the Estonian National Opera Orchestra, the evening's program was charged with energy and excitement as indeed befit Händel's greatest heroic opera. The audience was enthusiastic.

Posted by [Pamela Hickman](#) at [5:11 AM](#)

Labels: [Soloists from the Estonian National Opera; Claire Meghnagi; Yaniv D'Or; Voces Musicales \(Estonia\)](#)